DC COMICS
VERTIGO
BOOK 2 OF 3

DESTINY

A CHRONICLE OF DEATHS FORETOLD

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LYVE I ∞ LYVE TO DYE AND DYE TO LYVE ETARNALLY

BOOK TWO: BLACK DEATH

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OCTOBER 30, 2009. FROM THE JOURNAL OF RUTH KNIGHT:

In the seven years since the coming of the plague, I have learned how to live alone.

At first I had the excuse of needing to bury my loved ones. I washed my husband's corpse, a task more intimate than sex. I settled my daughter in her grave, glad at least that it was me, and not some rubber-gloved undertaker.

And then they were gone and there was nothing left to do. No one to tend. No one to live for.

So I learned to get by without reasons. I have no justification for my existence anymore. I am nobody's mother, nobody's wife, nobody's daughter or sister or friend.

It shames me sometimes, this urge to survive. It seems shallow and animal, to want to go on when everyone I ever cared for is dead.

And then a stranger came and talked to me and made me remember what it was like, to discover the echoes of yourself in someone else's story.

I allowed myself to imagine we were friends.

I permitted myself to hope for more.

But John Ryder was just another scavenger.

He wanted a horse. Easy transportation. Fresh meat. Portable wealth.

He wanted the only thing in my life that the pestilence hadn't taken.

I told him to pack his things and go.

I don't remember what he said after that. I thought he was going to hurt me.

No. I'm lying. I do remember.

WOULDN'T YOU REALLY RATHER HAVE ME STAY AND TAKE YOUR DEAD HUSBAND'S PLACE IN BED TONIGHT? CLOSE YOUR EYES AND IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER WHO--OR WHAT--IS TOUCHING YOU...

Then suddenly all his rage and contempt seemed to disappear, and in his silence I understood: it wasn't desire that motivated him.

AH, FORGIVE ME, RUTH.

It wasn't greed, either, though I could see how badly he wanted Paladin.

But whatever demons hounded him were stronger than desire.

I found him raining down blows on his own bare back. The whip he used was it from the stable. It must have been his own, brought with him out of that past he refused to reveal.

I wondered what sin he atoned for – whom he had abandoned, or stolen from, or murdered.

I wondered whose faith he had betrayed.

I dreamt of graves and passageways that night, and smelled the damp stone smell of dungeons.

I walked in catacombs that were sweet with the dust of old bones.

I saw someone there among the legions of the dead. A hooded figure dressed in gray. A monk, perhaps.

I came awake to the sound of quiet weeping.

At the time when Ryder laid his head on my lap, I thought of him as a penitent knight.

But now I see that he was merely a sorrowing child.

The next morning Ryder asked me if I would accompany him to the Boyles' house, to listen to the next installment of his "Book of Destiny."

I told him there wasn't any point.

Whatever his scam was, I wasn't buying it.

As for the Boyles, holed up inside their insane mausoleum of a house, more grieved by the loss of their Manhattan penthouse than by the deaths of their two young sons—

Well, I figured they deserved to be cheated.

They all deserved it. Martin, a small man made smaller by adversity; Janet, who seemed to have gotten religion and abandoned compassion.

And then I thought about Norman, who was the closest thing I had to a friend.

No. Let me be honest. It wasn't because of Norman that I decided to go. It was because I was curious, and restless and bored.

YOU CAME.

For a moment, all I saw was how pleased Ryder was to see me.

WHERE DID YOU STABLE PALADIN?

But only for a moment.

Yet in the end, it didn't matter.

As Ryder began to read I felt myself drifting into a fantasy of another place, another time, and I believe I would have forgiven him anything, so grateful was I for this chance to escape my life for an hour.

"Where shall He wander, whither shall he ride?
To Canterbury town, to see the child bride.
What shall he bring her, now that day is done?
A gift of gravest chivalry, Fall's bitter dark plum."
–The Destiny Scroll

THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899:

It was late summer in the year of Our Lord 1348, when King Edward III brought his court to Canterbury, and the glorious day of the High Middle Ages was, indeed, almost done.

But while Edward led his household to one of their favourite castles, it was still the once upon a time of fairy tales.

England's ancient wood maintained some small dominion over the land; damsels could yet be found in tower chambers weaving tapestry unicorns and singing madrigals.

With a warrior king to guide her, England had grown strong. Even to her own armies, it seemed incredible that the backward child of Europe was finally powerful enough to challenge the might of France.

But Edward, whose mother had been a French princess, meant to annex a bit of France's glory as he laid claim to some of its lands.

Squat saxon churches gave way to elegant gothic cathedrals: the dank, inhospitable castles of an earlier age were refurbished with the trappings of luxury and wealth.

The inspiration for all this, however, sprang from *English* history. Edward desired another Camelot, complete with an elite, chivalric brotherhood of knights.

Toward this end, the king proposed a series of tournaments to test his men's skills: the best among them would be admitted into the Order of the Garter, a battlefield aristocracy to fight the French.

But a foul wind was blowing that year, and the stench of death rode those storms of August.

Even as Edward's knights prepared for the ceremonious dangers of the tilting ground, a *new* enemy was nearing England's shores.

It had no name as yet. Centuries later, when men looked back at the corpse-strewn continent and mourned, it would be called the Black Death.

In its own time it was simply known as *Pestilence:* one of the four horsemen who shall dismantle the world.

HERE WE ARE, THEN. DOVER CASTLE, THE FINEST OF ALL MY HOLDINGS. WHAT SAY YOU TO A WARM BED INDOORS, MY SON?

I SAY ANOTHER NIGHT ON THE GROUND AND ROOTS WOULD SPROUT FROM MY BACKSIDE.

WHAT'S THIS? COMPLAINTS FROM A KNIGHT WHILST THE LADIES SUFFER IN SILENCE?

WITH RESPECT, SIRE--THE LADIES ARE USED TO ROUGH TREATMENT ON THEIR *BACKS.*

CONFOUND THEM. I CANNOT HEAR A WORD THEY SAY.

PERHAPS 'TIS NOT FIT FOR WOMAN'S EARS.

IF 'TIS NOT FIT FOR OUR EARS, THEN 'TIS CERTAIN TO FIT SOME *OTHER* OF OUR PARTS, MILORD.

I *WILL* DISCOVER IT.

AND YOU, LITTLE JOANNE--ARE YOU NOT *CURIOUS* OF THE WAYS OF MEN?

ONCE I PROVE MYSELF YOUR FATHER'S ABLEST KNIGHT, METHINKS I MIGHT CLAIM A LITTLE *PRINCESS* AS PAYMENT. WHAT SAY YOU, SWEETING?

P-PLEASE, SIR, I DON'T...

AVAUNT!

WHA...?

WHAT BITCH WHELPED *THEE*, THAT THOU DOST HAIL THY BETTERS SO?

ARE WE SO QUICKLY *INTIMATES*, TO CALL EACH OTHER THEE AND THOU?

SO BE IT. THE *BITCH* THAT WAS MY MOTHER IS LONG DEAD. *THOU* HAST MY LEAVE TO BRING *THY* COMPLAINT TO ME *DIRECT*.

PRINCESS, WILL YOU PERMIT ME TO ESCORT YOU?

SIR, I DO NOT KNOW YOU.

A MATTER EASILY REMEDIED. I AM CALLED JOHN, AND WILL BE PLEASED TO SERVE YOU, PRINCESS.

HMPH. A *LANDLESS* KNIGHT, NO DOUBT.

BUT NOT WITHOUT *HONOUR*, LORD MALTRAVERS.

HOW DOST THOU KNOW MY--

JUST SEE TO HER HORSE, SIRRAH.

I'LL SEE THY PRICK AS A PLAYTHING FOR MY DOGS, THOU NOISOME LAD!

THOU HAST CHOSEN POORLY TO PLAY THE GALLANT WITH *ME*.

VERY POORLY INDEED.

HOW SWIFT HE IS!

MANY STEEDS ARE FLEET, PRINCESS. PALADIN IS TIRELESS, AND BRAVER THAN MOST KNIGHTS.

MEN ALWAYS LOVE THEIR HORSES BEST. MY FATHER SAID IT WAS SO.

AND WHAT DOES YOUR NOBLE SIRE SAY *WOMEN* LOVE?

M-MY FATHER...

HATH TAUGHT YOU TO TURN THE SHADE OF A ROSE, I SEE.

I THANK YOU, SIR JOHN. FARE WELL.

I SHALL, PRINCESS. BUT BEAR *THIS* IN MIND:

IN TIMES OF PEACE, THERE ARE GRAVER DANGERS FOR *LADIES* THAN FOR KNIGHTS.

OH, *TELL* US WHO IT IS! IS IT SIR GEOFFREY? OR THE HANDSOME MARGRAVE?

WHAT NONSENSE YOU PRATTLE, ALISOUN. I FAVOUR *NO* MAN ABOVE ANY OTHER.

TILL MY FATHER SHALL ARRANGE A MARRIAGE FOR ME, I REMAIN CHASTE IN THOUGHT AS WELL AS DEED.

TILL THE KING SHALL CHOOSE YOU *ANOTHER* HUSBAND, DO YOU MEAN?

FOR WAS IT NOT LAST YEAR THAT YOU WERE TO WED THAT COUNT FROM FLANDERS, LOUIS DE MALE?

HE RAN AWAY, DID HE NOT, AND MARRIED-- NOW, WHO WAS IT? MARGARET OF SOMETHING OR OTHER.

'TIS SAID SHE IS NOT SO FAIR AS YOU, BUT SHE *IS* FROM FLANDERS. THERE WAS EVEN A SONG WRITTEN ABOUT IT: I RECALL 'TWAS *WONDERFUL* SAD.

♪ MY HEART IS BROKEN, ALL IS MISERY, I HAVE LOST HIM WHOSE L[illegible]E I WAS GIVEN TO BE... ♪

SHUT *UP!* WRETCHED GIRL.

CAN'ST THOU NOT SEE HOW THESE LIES AFFECT THE PRINCESS? LEARN TO HOLD THY TONGUE.

BUT YOU YOURSELF TOLD ME THAT THE PRINCESS ISABELLA WAS BETROTHED TWICE! THE ONCE TO FLANDERS, AND THEN TO THAT PRINCE OF CASTILLE!

ANNE, YOU SIMPLETON, THAT IS THE PRINCESS *JOANNE'S* INTENDED.

AYE, TO BE SURE THE PRINCE IS PROMISED TO THE YOUNGER ONE *NOW*. BUT ONLY SINCE 'TWAS DISCOVERED HE IS *UN-BALANCED* IN HIS HUMOURS.

MARRY, THOU ART BRAVE, ANNE. MANY WOULD *FEAR* TO VOICE SUCH SLANDER BEFORE MY FACE.

BUT THOU HAST NOT THE *WIT* FOR FEAR.

IN TWO DAYS' TIME, DIRECTLY AFTER THE TOURNAMENT, MY SISTER SHALL LEAVE US TO BECOME A *PRINCESS* OF CASTILLE.

OW!

WILT *THOU* BE THE ONE TO TELL HER SHE WEDS *PEDRO THE CRUEL*?

NAY.

FOR *THOU* HAST TOLD ME IN HER STEAD.

JOANNE, THOU MUST NOT THINK--

THOU HAST NEVER SHARED A *THING* WITH ME, ISABELLA. NOT A DOLL. NOT A KERCHIEF. NOT A RING.

HOW STRANGE THAT THOU SHOULDST SUDDENLY DECIDE TO BESTOW ON ME A *HUSBAND.*

WHAT MANNER OF MAN *IS* HE, ISABELLA?

LIKE ANY OTHER, HE MAY BE CRUEL, OR HE MAY BE GENTLE, AS THE MOOD TAKES HIM.

WILL HE BE GENTLE WITH *ME?*

OH.

WILL HE BE GENTLE WITH HER, MY LADY?

HE WILL PROBABLY *KILL* HER BEFORE SHE DROPS HIM AN HEIR.

FATHER, I MUST...

IT CANNOT *ALL* BE WON BY THE SWORD, MALTRAVERS. WHAT CANNOT BE PRISED LOOSE FROM FRANCE BY THE BLADE MUST BE WON BY *OTHER* MEANS.

WE HAVE ALREADY LOST FLANDERS' SUPPORT. SURELY YOU CAN SEE THAT WE CANNOT AFFORD TO HAVE *CASTILLE* SIDE WITH THE FRENCH, AS WELL.

I DO NOT MEAN TO ARGUE POLITICS WITH YOU, SIRE. BUT WAS IT NOT *ISABELLA* WHO WAS BETROTHED TO THE PRINCE? AND WAS *JOANNE* NOT INTENDED TO BE *MINE*?

MY POOR ISABELLA HAS BEEN SPURNED *ONCE*, BY THAT WRETCHED BOY, LOUIS. AT FIRST I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE BEST TO REPLACE ONE GROOM WITH ANOTHER, BUT IT SEEMS HER GENTLE HEART NEEDS TIME TO *MEND*.

I THINK IT MIGHT *KILL* HER TO SEND HER AWAY NOW. AND JOANNE IS YOUNG AND STRONG; IT WILL BE *EASY* FOR HER TO ADAPT TO A NEW COUNTRY.

YOU SHALL HAVE ANOTHER *TITLE* AND *LAND* TO COMPENSATE YOU.

THANK YOU, SIRE. THAT IS MOST GENEROUS.

MY *LADY!*

JUST THE PERSON WHOSE COMPANY I MOST *DESIRE.*

COME. I WOULD BEG YOUR INDULGENCE A MOMENT.

MY LORD, PERHAPS *LATER...*

THERE IS NO *LATER*, JOANNE. THERE IS ONLY *NOW.*

ART THOU IN ALL TRUTH AS SLIM AS A BOY, OR HAST THOU SPROUTED BREASTS?

AH, THE *SMELL* OF YOUTH...

NO...

THAT'S IT, SWEETING, DO NOT FIGHT ME.

AH, BUT 'TIS I WHO OFFER THE *FIGHT*, MALTRAVERS.

THOU HAST DEVILLED ME ENOUGH TO EARN *SEVERAL* DEATHS.

MUCH AS I *ENJOY* THY COMPANY, I MEANT ONLY TO TAKE MY TURN AT GUARD.

LEAVE, OR BLEED.

HER FATHER WILL NOT GIVE HER TO A *LANDLESS KNIGHT*, YOU KNOW. AND BETTER *ME* THAN THE SAVAGE *SHIT* HER FATHER'S CHOSEN.

THERE NOW, PRINCESS, ALL'S WELL.

IS IT?

HE DID NOT... HARM YOU?

I AM STILL A *MAIDEN*.

DO YOU KNOW, SIR, I HAVE NEVER *BEEN* UP HERE BEFORE. WHAT A LOVELY THING, TO PERCH ABOVE THE WORLD LIKE AN EAGLE.

THAT MUST BE MY SISTER DOWN THERE, YET SHE LOOKS AS TINY AS...

AH!

WHAT IS IT?

I SEE... I SEE...

I KNOW.

"YOU SEE WHAT *I* SEE, JOANNE. THE COMING OF *AUTUMN*."

I KNOW IT MAY SEEM *ODD*, YOUR HIGHNESS, BUT IN *MY* COUNTRY, THEY SAY NO *WIFE* CAN TRULY *LOVE* HER HUSBAND.

AND WHY IS *THAT*, PRAY?

BECAUSE LOVE MUST BE GIVEN *FREELY*, AND MARRIAGE IS A *DUTY*.

BUT, MY DEAR MARGRAVE, THAT WOULD MEAN ONLY *SPINSTERS* MIGHT KNOW LOVE.

MAIS *NON*, YOUR MAJESTY...

ACCORDING TO THE RULES OF COURTLY LOVE, NO MAN CAN HONOURABLY PAY COURT TO AN *UN-MARRIED* WOMAN.

YOUR *HONOUR* MUST DIFFER VASTLY FROM OURS. THE HOLY MOTHER CHURCH TELLS US...

THAT *NUNS* ARE *CHASTE*, AND WE KNOW *THAT'S* A LIE.

YOU MAY SCOFF, BUT THE FRENCH ARE BEING *PUNISHED* FOR THEIR LECHEROUS WAYS. TELL THEM HOW THINGS GO IN *GASCONY*, MARGRAVE.

GASCONY? BUT THAT REGION IS UNDER OUR PROTECTION.

THE PRINCESS JOANNE SETS SAIL FOR BORDEAUX IN TWO DAYS' TIME, TO MEET HER BRIDEGROOM. WHAT PASSES THERE?

THERE ARE RUMOURS, SIRE, OF SOME SUMMER *FEVER* FROM ITALY.

YET I HAVE HEARD THE ITALIANS ARE *ALWAYS* IN A FEVER! THEY ARE A *STRANGE*, HOT-BLOODED RACE, ARE THEY NOT?

YET EVEN THE FIERY *GENOESE* DO NOT OFTEN TURN *BLACK* AND *PUTREFY* IN *AUGUST*.

AND IN THAT COUNTRY, PRINCESS, PETRARCH'S BELOVED LAURA LIES IN A COMMON GRAVE.

THERE ARE MORE CORPSES IN FLORENCE THAN THERE ARE LIVING BEINGS IN LONDON. IN ROME ITSELF, PRIESTS ABANDON THE DYING.

THE DEATHS OF STRANGERS IN DISTANT PLACES DO NOT TOUCH ME, SIR KNIGHT, SO MUCH AS THE TRAVAILS OF ENGLISHMEN ON ENGLISH SOIL.

THEN YOU WILL BE TOUCHED, ISABELLA, FOR THIS DEATH IS COMING AND NONE MAY STOP IT.

LET ME DISEMBOWEL HIM!

PEACE, MALTRAVERS. LET ISABELLA CHOOSE HER CHAMPION.

I CHOOSE MYSELF.

WHAP

AS THOU HAST TAKEN OUR COMPANY'S LIGHT MOOD AND MADE IT **GRIM**, I CHALLENGE THEE TO **ENTERTAIN** US.

YOUR WISH, PRINCESS, IS MY COMMAND.

THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899:

The melody he played had something of Byzantium in it, a song of strong sunlight and hidden courtyards.

It was the song of a forgotten world, and these royal *barbarians* heard the ghosts in it, and shivered.

Why did he play it so? It is said no instrument can mock like a flute.

Yet it is also true no other music *mourns* more softly.

JESU, THE RATS--WHAT CAN THIS PORTEND?

YOU WERE MEANT TO BE ABED.

THEY HAVE GONE!

THE MAN MUST BE A MAGICIAN, TO BEND VERMIN TO HIS WHIM.

OR A CONJURER, IN LEAGUE WITH SATAN.

THIS WAS NOT MEANT FOR YOUR EYES, LITTLE ONE.

YET YOU SEE WHAT THE OTHERS WILL NOT...

I HAD NOT THOUGHT YOU WERE THE ONE FOR ME, OR THAT THE END WOULD COME SO SOON.

YOU SEEM MORE CHILD THAN WOMAN... YET IF YOU ARE THE MAIDEN IN WHITE, THEN YOU MUST BE FOREWARNED.

WHAT IS IT?

KNOWLEDGE, PRINCESS...

"OF THE KIND *EVE* PLUCKED AND OFFERED *ADAM*."

OH, GET YOU *GONE*, JOANNE.

BUT OUR LADY MOTHER SAID I WAS NOT TO LEAVE YOU ALONE WITH...

YOU CALL THIS *ALONE*? 'TIS HARVEST FAIR!

AND IN ALL TRUTH, THE *JEWEL* YOU WERE TOLD TO PROTECT WAS LONG SINCE *LOST* BY ME.

IF YE'LL FORGIVE ME, MILADY, YE LOOKS LIKE ONE THAT NEEDS A FORTUNE TOLD.

METHINKS *THIS* MIGHT BE A FORTUNE OF A KIND, YET MUCH OF THE SENSE ESCAPES ME. 'TIS LATIN, I SUPPOSE, BUT A STRANGE SORT.

I READ PALMS, MILADY, NOT LETTERS.

NOW, SHOW OLD AGNES WHAT'S IN THIS PRETTY LITTLE...

WELL, WELL, I SEE A TALL, DARK STRANGER AND A JOURNEY, AND-- WHAT'S THIS?

STRANGE, THAT LINE--

NAY!

WHAT IS IT?

YE HAVE NO FUTURE, CHILD.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND!

OH!

SINNER, REPENT, FOR THE *HARVEST* DAYS ARE UPON US AND SOON IS THE *DYING* TIME.

TH'ART MAD! SHE WAS FROM THE *CASTLE*, MARTIN.

BUT I WAS NAMED REAPER THIS HARVEST. I AM *MEANT* TO FRIGHTEN FOLK, BOTH *HIGH* AND LOW.

"BUT THOU ART *NOT* THE REAPER. THOU ART ONLY POOR MARTIN FLETCHER, AND HAST GIVEN OFFENSE TO A *LADY.*"

"LEAVE YER FRIEND BE, LAD. THE GIRL HATH GOOD *CAUSE* TO FEAR. THE DEATH THAT *WAITS* ON HER IS NOT LIKE ANY *DEATH* OLD AGNES EVER SAW."

OHBLESSEDVIRGIN PLEASEPROTECTME...

AHH!

HOW ODD... I THOUGHT TO GREET YOUR *SISTER*. BUT NO, IT IS YOUR NAME INSCRIBED HERE AFTER ALL.

WELCOME TO MY GARDEN, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE KING.

REVEREND FATHER, I SEEM TO BE LOST AND--

I AM NO PRIEST.

OH, PLEASE, DO NOT TAKE ME-- I DO NOT WANT TO DIE UNSHRIVEN!

I AM NOT DEATH, JOANNE.

YOU'RE NOT?

I AM DESTINY, AND I... CAN YOU NOT RELEASE MY ROBE, GIRL?

OH, I AM SORRY. I WAS JUST SO FRIGHTENED.

WHY FEAR THE UNKNOWN MORE THAN THE KNOWN? WITH THE FORMER, THERE IS HOPE.

GIVE ME THAT PARCHMENT, KING'S DAUGHTER, AND HOPE CAN BE YOURS AGAIN.

BUT YOU--YOU'RE BLIND.

AND YET YOU SAID-- AS IF YOU SAW--

D-DESTINY?

YOU CANNOT RUN FROM ME, JOANNE--

"FOR UNTIL JOURNEY'S END, I SHALL ALWAYS BE BEFORE YOU."

THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS, GREAT BRITAIN, 1899:

The plague is a relatively *fragile* thing. It suffers in extremes of summer heat, and often hides itself through winter's fiercest cold.

But when conditions favour it, as in early autumn, it can cut through entire *counties* like a scythe.

The plague wears different *faces* in different seasons.

In spring and summer, it reveals itself in dark, gangrenous swellings at armpit and groin.

The *tokens* of bubonic plague.

The victim then haemorrhages internally, and the stench of decaying flesh accompanies the onset of madness and *death*.

SIR JOHN!

In the colder months, the plague takes on *another* aspect, entering the lungs and causing a blood flux that can be spread from person to person by any close contact.

I THINK I MAY HAVE MET A NECROMANCER. HE WANTS THIS *PAGE* YOU GAVE ME...

This pneumonic form of plague is the rarest and most deadly: within *hours* of exposure, the victim contracts a rash, and expires before the day is out.

I HAVE ERRED IN MY JUDGMENT.

When all three strains combine together, as they did in the *Black Death,* corpses lie where they fall, for no one is left to bury the dead.

LOOK! IT'S GONE!

THEY'RE ALL *ALIVE!* I MUST HAVE HAD SOME FELL *VISION,* FOR ALL IS AS IT *SHOULD* BE.

MAYHAP.

ALL IS WELL!

ALL *SHALL* BE WELL, AFTER TOMORROW'S JOUST.

SPLUT

I *CHALLENGE* THEE, WHORESON BASTARD. UNTO THE DEATH.

YES, I ACCEPT.

TO THE *DEATH.*

MALTRAVERS FIGHTS LIKE A MAN *POSSESSED*. IS IT LOVE, OR RAGE, INSPIRES HIM?

SURELY HE CANNOT DEFEAT YOUR *BROTHER*, PRINCESS.

KLANNG

THAT'S A FINE HORSE, MY PRINCE, DID YOU TRULY MEAN TO LEAVE HIM SO SPEEDILY?

YOU ARE IN GOOD FORM THIS DAY, MALTRAVERS. I PITY YOUR NEXT OPPONENT.

YOU MAY TAKE PITY ON HIM, BUT *I* WILL NOT.

WHO IS IT? WHO FIGHTS NEXT?

A *MADMAN!*

I SEE IT IS THY DESIRE TO DIE *QUICKLY!*

IT IS MY DESIRE TO TRADE *WORDS* WITH THE PRINCESS JOANNE, AND TO EXCHANGE *BLOWS* WITH YOU, MALTRAVERS.

WHY ARE YOU *ATTIRED SO*, IN ARMOUR MY *GRANDFATHER* MIGHT HAVE WORN?

I PREFER THE *OLD* STYLE, PRINCESS.

HAVE YOU A *FAVOUR* FOR ME?

I HAVE NO TOKEN FOR A *SUICIDE*, SIR KNIGHT.

GODSPEED.

It is part of human nature to *fear* death. Only in the grip of great suffering, disease or old age do most of us accept the inevitable.

Those few who *embrace* it while youth and vigor remain are *forever* set apart.

They are called martyrs or heroes.

Fanatics or saints.

They are admired and raged at and grieved over long after more *usual* deaths are forgiven and forgotten.

They are the stuff of *legend,* and we half expect them to rise again.

Or pray that they do *not.*

YOU FOOL.

MOTHER...?

I AM NOT YOUR MOTHER. I AM NOTHING TO YOU, AS YOU HAVE MADE PLAIN TODAY. IS *THIS* THE DEATH YOU DESIRED?

IT IS THE DEATH I *CHOOSE*... IF THE CHOICE IS, IN ALL TRUTH, *MINE* TO MAKE.

FOR I HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT MY TIME WILL NOT COME TILL *ALL* TIME IS DONE...

COME AWAY NOW.

IS IT *DESTINY'S* WILL THAT YOU SPEND YOUR LIFE HERE?

DESTINY *HAS* NO WILL, LITTLE PRINCESS, AND BESIDES... MY DEATH HERE WOULD BE... WELL SPENT.

AWAY, JOANNE, FROM THIS PLACE.

NOOOO!!

AWAY, JOANNE--

--AND *FORGET* THIS KNIGHT, WHOEVER HE IS. A HUSBAND AWAITS YOU IN GASCONY.

YOUR ARMOUR IS NOT WORTH THE CLAIMING, BUT AT LEAST THIS *STEED* WAS WORTH THE FIGHT.

NEEIGH!

DEVIL TAKE HIM, THEN, AND *YOU* AS WELL.

UNGH!

I'LL *KILL* THE MAN WHO *MOVES* THIS KNIGHT, TO SUCCOR HIM, REDEEM HIS SOUL, OR LAY HIS BONES TO REST.

LET HIM *ROT* HERE!

The *Black Death* was coming to England, but before it could arrive, King Edward's youngest daughter sailed to meet it in Bordeaux.

Her journey brought her into the heart of a *necropolis,* where the putrid stench of spreading disease had replaced the dense aroma of the region's fabled wine.

Joanne was spared her husband's cruelty, but not the plague's. She died two days after her arrival.

As reports of the terrible pestilence spread, the English court tried to avoid the contagious air of London and its environs. To no avail.

According to most sources, Maltravers was among the first to discover a plum-sized *knot* in his armpit. He mistook it for an injury from the tilting field.

Then, in October 1349, pretty Alisoun felt a *headache* that would not go away. Redheaded Anne, who shared her friend's bedchamber, also shared her *fate*.

The handsome Margrave of Juliers, who shared *both* their beds, took until November of that year to die.

Isabella, on the other hand, lived to marry and bear children, and died of a lung fever at the age of *forty-seven*.

In the last, lingering moments of summer, it seems as if an endless afternoon is finally giving way to evening, and yet there is a kind of relief as the sun begins to fade.

It is almost as if that whole balmy season were a day-dream, and life, *real* life, begins with the sharp scent of bonfire and the falling of night.

Our grandparents called harvest the dying time, and made of Death a reaper. They knew the rituals which we have forgotten; they understood what we no longer wish to see.

That nothing in life is so *predictable* as our sudden departure from it, and that of us not taken by other means shall accompany the pale rider that nowadays we call *Disease*.

And so I hope that these old *stories*, borrowed from dusty tomes in forgotten libraries, have some grain of truth in them, for it comforts me to imagine that Pestilence abhors the task he has been given, and rides, not to bring *evil* into the world, but to escape the hand of *Destiny*.
THE BOOK OF DESTINY, GRIMOIRE PUBLISHERS, 1899.

OCTOBER 31, 2009. FROM THE JOURNAL OF RUTH KNIGHT:

It's strange. Most of Ryder's story felt like a warped fairy tale—

—like one of those dark fantasy novels where there are lepers as well as leprechauns.

It didn't touch me.

The others, I think, felt differently.

OH LORD, IT SEEMS SO SAD. IF JOANNE HAD STAYED BEHIND--

SHE STILL MIGHT HAVE DIED. THE BLACK DEATH SPREAD ***EVERY-WHERE,*** JANET. IT JUST REACHED SOME PLACES EARLIER THAN OTHERS.

BUT IF SHE'D KNOWN EXACTLY WHEN AND WHERE THE PLAGUE WOULD STRIKE NEXT, SHE MIGHT HAVE STAYED ONE STEP AHEAD.

UNLESS ***KNOWING*** HER FATE DIDN'T MEAN SHE COULD DO ANYTHING TO ***CHANGE*** IT.

WHICH IS IT, RYDER? IF THAT BOOK OF YOURS ***DOES*** PREDICT OUR FUTURES, CAN WE DO ANYTHING TO CHANGE WHAT'S BEEN WRITTEN?

boom

boom

bOom

boom

WELL, I...

Just then, like in an old horror movie, came the knocking at the door.

ALL RIGHT, EVERYONE MOVE ***AWAY*** FROM THE DOOR! WE DON'T KNOW ***WHO'S*** OUT THERE, SO LET'S TAKE EVERY POSSIBLE PRECAUTION.

YOU MOVE, MARTIN. I'M ***ANSWERING*** IT.

When I was young, my mother told me that if I saw a wild animal approach our house, I should never touch it.

Because it was probably sick or wounded and near death.

Common wisdom, I suppose.

GET THAT FUCKING DOOR CLOSED!

HE'S GOT A POINT, RUTHIE...

JESUS *CHRIST*, WHY ARE YOU ALL JUST *STANDING* THERE? SHUT THE *GODDAMNED* FUCKING DOOR!

WHAT'S THE *MATTER* WITH YOU? THESE ARE JUST *CHILDREN*, AND THEY'VE BEEN LIVING OUTDOORS.

THEY'RE PROBABLY WEAK FROM COLD AND HUNGER. THIS GIRL COULD SIMPLY HAVE THE FLU.

BUT WE CAN'T KNOW THAT FOR SURE, RUTH, AND EVEN THE *BIBLE* DOESN'T ASK US TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS MORE THAN OURSELVES.

GO READ IT *AGAIN*, JANET. I THINK YOU MISSED SOMETHING.

DON'T BE AFRAID, SWEET-HEART.

For the record, I didn't try to help that child because I was noble, or generous, or brave.

I picked that girl up because I thought: if I can save her, she'll come live with me. I can raise her.

And if she dies, I can bury her, and be of use again.

THREE YEARS AGO...THREE YEARS AGO I WAS ***READY*** TO DIE. I WOULD HAVE HELPED THAT LITTLE GIRL THEN. WITHOUT THINKING.

BUT NOW...

NOW IT'S BEGINNING AGAIN.

HOW ***LONG*** WERE WE EXPOSED, THOUGH? ONLY FOR A MOMENT. A MOMENT'S NOTHING. WE'LL JUST STAY ***INSIDE,*** THAT'S ALL.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ***RUTH?***

WHY DON'T WE JUST LOOK IT UP IN THAT ***BOOK OF DESTINY,*** AND FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS?

BUT I ALREADY KNOW WHAT HAPPENS.

DOES THAT MEAN IT'S ***SAFE?*** WHAT DID HE MEAN?

HE MEANS WE HAVE TO ***BUY*** HIS DAMN BOOK.

SO LET'S ***DO*** IT! ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE MONEY? WE DON'T ***NEED*** MONEY!

NO ONE NEEDS ***MONEY*** ANYMORE, CLARISSA. AND IF ***WE*** HAD WHAT THAT YOUNG MAN WANTS, THEN HE'D STILL BE HERE WITH ***US...*** INSTEAD OF HEADING OUT TO A PLAGUE-INFESTED BARN TO FIND ***RUTH.***

The girl was burning with fever, and the light seemed to hurt her eyes.

Symptoms that could mean anything.

AREN'T YOU AFRAID OF BECOMING INFECTED, RYDER?

NO, RUTH. I AM NOT.

BUT *YOU* ARE AFRAID, AND I CAN HELP YOU.

YOUR BOOK WITH ALL THE *ANSWERS*. DOES IT *TELL* WHETHER THIS GIRL WILL LIVE OR DIE?

But I think I already knew that there were answers that weren't in Ryder's book, secrets that he carried inside.

And even then, before I knew the whole of it...

WHAT'S HER LIFE *WORTH* TO YOU, RUTH?

...I understood the question wasn't rhetorical.

To Be Continued

THEY SAY THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT.

For the desperate survivors of a terrible twenty-first century plague, a history lesson might be all that stands between them and the grave. But as the man called John Ryder weaves his tale of chivalry and dishonor in the time of the Black Death, the lessons of the past are interrupted by the horrors of the present.

Now, Ryder must reveal his true nature to convince one young woman that he alone has the means to thwart Destiny.

SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"